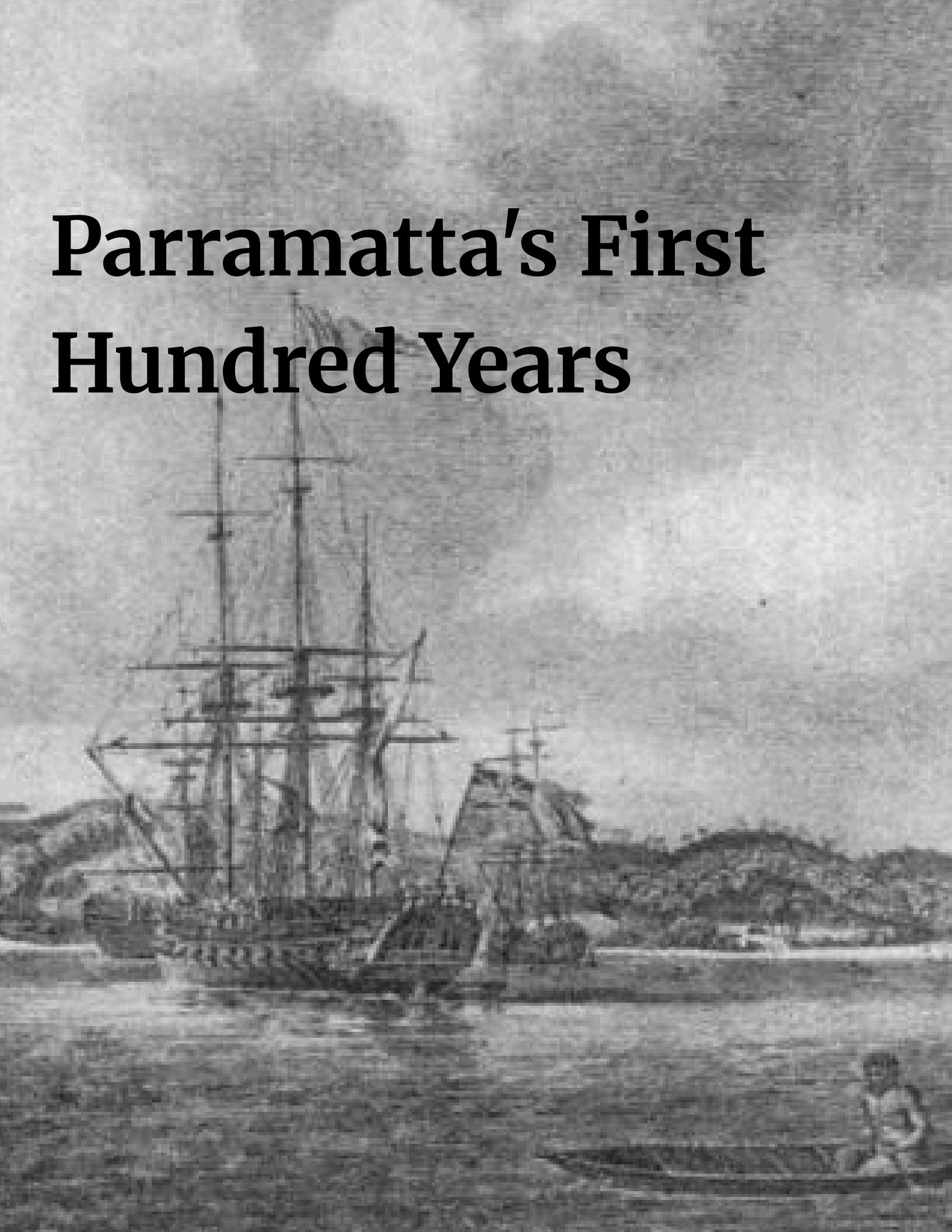
# Parramatta's First Hundred Years



# Parramatta's First Hundred Years - Through the Eyes of a Convict

Before it was a second CBD, Parramatta was the difference between the colony eating and the colony starving. Sydney Cove had the harbour, but its sandy soil grew almost nothing. Twenty-five kilometres inland, where the water ran fresh and the ground was actually good for farming, the British planted a second settlement in 1788, and within two years it had a name that stuck.

What follows is the story of its first century, told through the people who actually lived it: the sea captain who named the country almost by accident, the governor who chose the site with his own two feet, a transported London pickpocket who ended up running the place, a French doctor riding out from Sydney on a day trip, a settler pouring rum over his wife's grave, an orange grower who bred a single tree that produced ten thousand fruit in a season, and a local GP in 1875 who was furious enough about vaccination to print his own pamphlet about it.

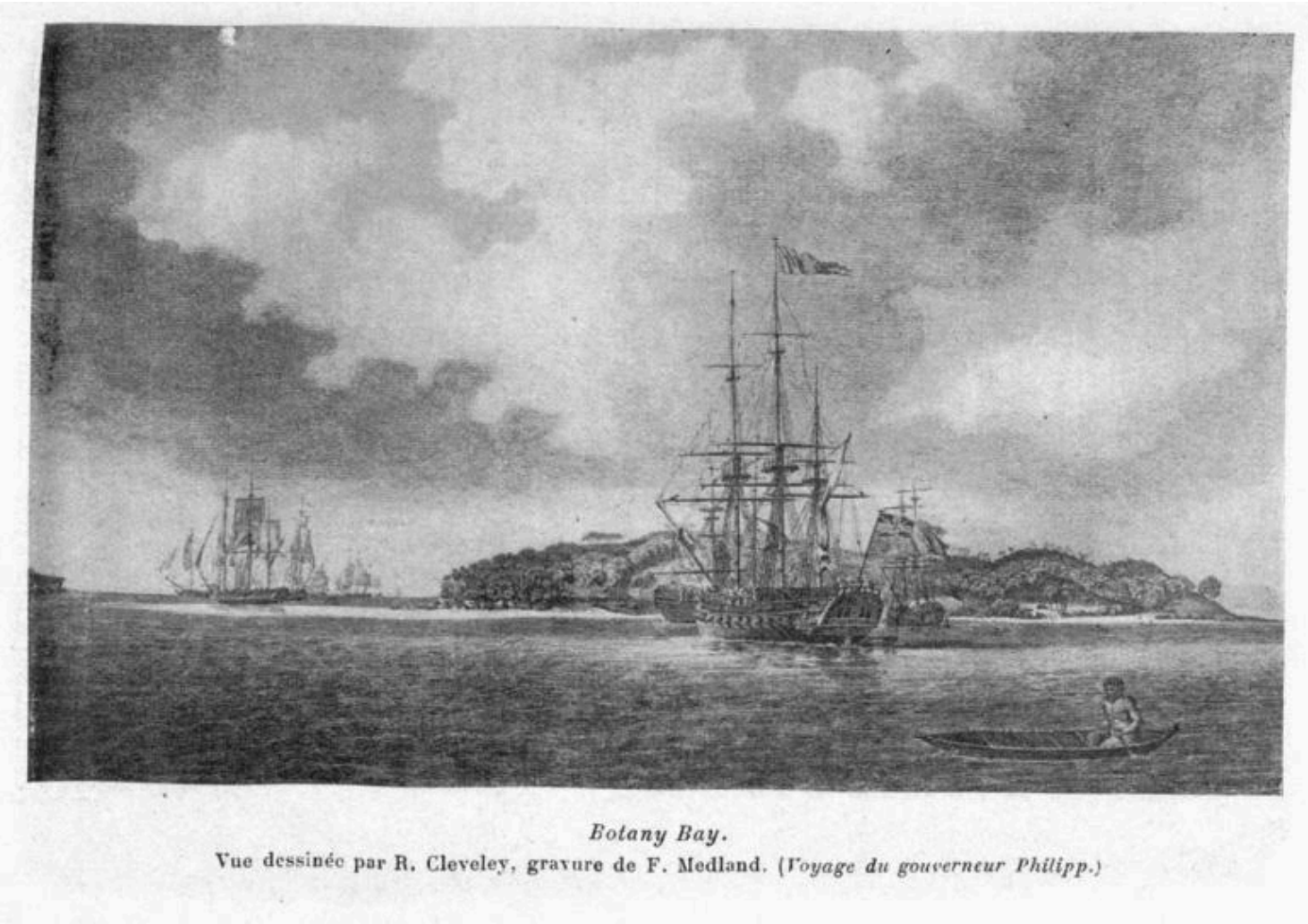
## 1770: A Ten-Day Visit That Named a Country

Parramatta's story doesn't actually start with Phillip. It starts eighteen years earlier, with a ship that was never meant to stay long. In 1770, Lieutenant James Cook sailed the east coast of what Europeans still called New Holland, charting it for the first time and giving the whole stretch a new name: New South Wales.

Cook's stay was short, barely long enough to take on water and make general observations, but it was long enough for the naturalist travelling with him, Joseph Banks, to find such an extraordinary range of new plant life on the shores of one particular harbour that the crew ended up naming the place after his discipline. Botany Bay. Neither Cook nor Banks lingered to explore it properly, and neither of them had any way of knowing that within two decades this brief, almost incidental visit would be the reason a fleet of convict ships was sent to the exact same stretch of coast.

## 1788: The Fleet Chooses Port Jackson Over Botany Bay

When that fleet finally arrived, in January 1788, it very nearly settled at Botany Bay itself, exactly where Cook had landed. Governor Arthur Phillip had left the main body of ships behind at the Cape of Good Hope, sailing ahead in a faster vessel so he'd have time to choose a site before the rest of the fleet caught up. It was a rough final stretch, squalls, heavy swells, a coastline that looked "high, rocky, and barren" from the deck, and it wasn't until the 19th of January that the ships finally worked their way into Botany Bay itself.



*Botany Bay.*
Vue dessinée par R. Cleveley, gravure de F. Medland. (*Voyage du gouverneur Philipp.*)

What Phillip found once he got there was a disappointment. There was barely enough flat, clear ground for the whole settlement to "sit down," as the record puts it, and nowhere close by had reliable fresh water. So Phillip did something that says a lot about the kind of man he was: rather than settle for a mediocre site because it was the one everyone expected, he took a small party out in open boats to look further afield, at Port Jackson and Broken Bay. As they rowed along the coast, local Aboriginal people watched them from the shore and called out "warre, warre, warre," go away, go away, go away, though people back at Botany Bay itself had shown no hostility at all. Port Jackson turned out to be everything Botany Bay wasn't: a deep, sheltered harbour, easily capable of holding a whole fleet. Phillip chose a cove on it almost immediately and went back to Botany Bay to move the ships.

He nearly didn't get the chance. On the very morning the fleet was due to relocate, two strange sails appeared on the horizon: French ships, the Boussole and Astrolabe, arriving under the command of the explorer La Pérouse, on his own voyage of discovery, at almost the exact moment the British fleet was leaving. It's one of history's stranger coincidences that two rival European expeditions nearly collided at the one useful harbour on this entire stretch of coast, within hours of each other, after years of separate voyages. Phillip pressed on regardless. On 26 January 1788, his party landed at the cove they'd chosen, cleared enough ground to make camp, ran up a flag, and fired off a volley of muskets while the officers drank a round of toasts to the King and to the new colony's success. By the next evening the whole fleet had come around from Botany Bay, and the settlement properly known as Sydney had begun.

## 1788: Ten Convicts and an Axe

Sydney Cove, though, had exactly the same problem Phillip had already half-suspected: the soil was poor and sandy, hopeless for growing food at any real scale. He didn't wait long to go looking for something better. On 2 November 1788, less than a year after landing, Phillip travelled to a rise the fleet had been calling "the Crescent," on the banks of a river that ran fresh well upstream of the harbour's saltwater reaches. He sent ten convicts out with axes to start clearing it, and named the rise Rose Hill.

*Vue à Port-Jackson.*
Dessin de J. White, gravé par T. Milton.
(White, *Journal*, 1790.)

It worked almost immediately. Grain came up where nothing at Sydney would. By June 1790, Phillip was confident enough in the place to give it a permanent name, taking the local Darug word for the area: Parramatta. A year later he laid the whole thing out as a proper town, not a camp, with his own hand on the plan. The main street ran a mile west from the river landing, an enormous 205 feet wide, lined with huts spaced 60 feet apart, each meant to house ten people. For a settlement still short of nails and short of food, that was a serious commitment to the idea that this place was permanent, not a fallback.

# The Pickpocket Who Kept the Records

Much of what's known about Parramatta's earliest years comes down to us through one particular man, and it's worth stopping to explain who he actually was, because his own story is nearly as strange as the colony's.

Dessin d'après nature.
(*London Magazine*, mai 1777.)

George Barrington was born in 1755 in Maynooth, a small town west of Dublin, the son of a struggling silversmith. A local doctor taught him to read; a clergyman helped get him into a proper school. None of it stuck in the way anyone hoped.

As a teenager he stabbed a schoolmate with a penknife, was flogged for it, and ran off with a travelling theatre troupe, taking the stage name Barrington along the way. When the troupe's manager turned to picking pockets to cover unpaid wages, Barrington went with him, and the acting training never really left him. For years he worked the crowds of London dressed as a clergyman one week and a naval officer the next, so well turned out and so well spoken that some of his victims reportedly forgave him on the spot once they realised who'd robbed them.

It caught up with him eventually. Multiple arrests, one narrow acquittal funded by a whip-round from his fellow thieves, and finally a conviction that sent him to the prison hulks moored on the Thames at Woolwich, decommissioned ships used as floating gaols once the American colonies had stopped taking Britain's convicts. From there he was transported to New South Wales on the ship Albemarle, arriving not long after the colony itself had been founded.

He served his time, was pardoned, and was eventually appointed superintendent of convicts, the man responsible for managing the colony's convict workforce on the ground, a position that put a former London pickpocket in direct, daily charge of the very system that had transported him.

It's Barrington's own later account of the colony's founding and first years, written from that vantage point, that supplies much of the fine detail this story runs on: the dimensions of the buildings, the dates of the fires, the names of the people who lived and died in Parramatta's first, hardest decade.

# 1790’s: A Decade Where Nothing Stayed Standing

Almost nothing built in Parramatta's first decade survived intact, and Barrington's account is almost obsessive about listing what burned, flooded, or simply rotted. The early huts fell apart within a few years and had to be rebuilt. A log gaol burned down overnight in 1798 with prisoners still locked inside; they were pulled out in time, but one later died of his burns. A separate fire took out a public granary, an estimated three thousand bushels of wheat gone along with it, cause never established. A bridge across the river was simply swept away by floodwater. A nearly finished Government House was badly damaged in the same violent storm season that tore the roof off Sydney's church, and the record from the time says plainly that the whole settlement was set back at least a year by that one run of bad weather.

People suffered along with the buildings. In January 1793, the wife of a settler named Williams, along with her child and a second woman, were rowing back from Sydney to Parramatta with a bag of rice when the boat overturned; all three drowned. Williams and his wife had been fighting bitterly just before she got in the boat, and she'd apparently said she hoped never to make it home to him. He buried her and the child within a few yards of his own front door, and a few days later was seen sitting at the graveside with a bottle of rum, drinking one glass and pouring the next onto the ground, telling anyone nearby how much she'd loved it while she was alive.

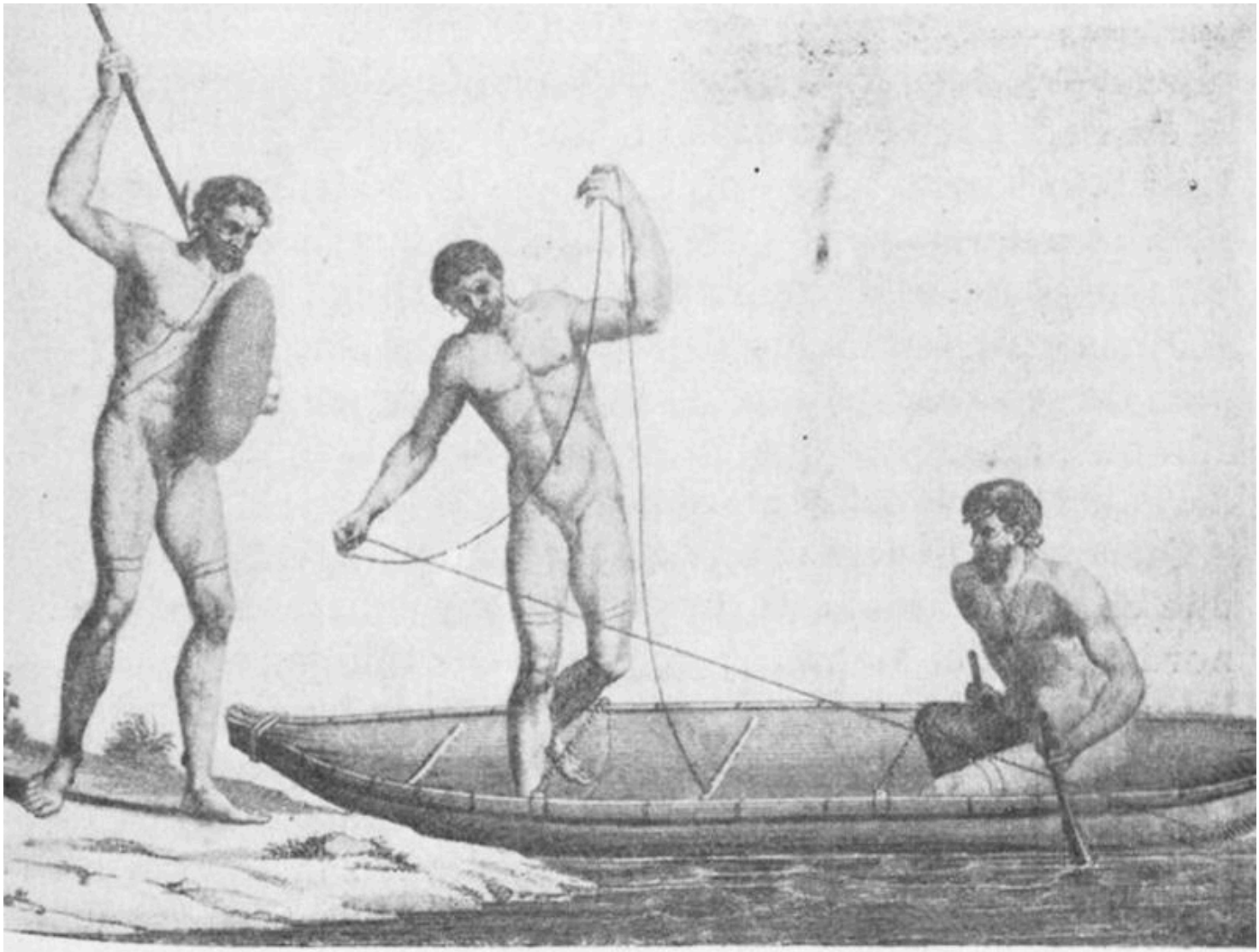
A year later, an elderly convict named Lewis, sent out to watch the government's cattle, was murdered and left in a hollow under logs and branches; wild dogs had already got to the body by the time it was found. He'd made the mistake of boasting he'd saved money and sewn it into his clothes. Whoever killed him was never caught.

Not everything was grim. Once the town filled out enough to matter, licensed passage boats began running the river route between Sydney and Parramatta, a shilling a head, another shilling per hundredweight of luggage, all of it run by ex-convicts who'd served their time and gone into business for themselves. It was, in its small way, the first proper public transport New South Wales ever had.

## Rebuilding in Brick

Everything that burned or washed away in the 1790s got rebuilt bigger and less flammable the second time. A hundred-foot brick granary went up, then had sixty feet added because the colony still had nowhere proper to store wheat. A second granary, 140 feet long, went up for maize. A proper church was finally built too, a hundred feet long, with its own stone-pillared vestry room and a purpose-built tower just to house a town clock, a genuine extravagance for a settlement that had been rationing food a few years earlier. It opened on 10 April 1803, and the record notes with obvious relief that Sunday worship was finally being properly attended by everyone in the district, a small line that says a lot about how ragged those first years actually were.

Along the way, the darker side of colonial order kept pace with the ordinary convict population too. A man named Mitton, twice previously pardoned from death sentences, once in Ireland and once in the colony, was finally hanged at Parramatta for robbery, confessing on the scaffold to a string of other planned crimes and naming a blacksmith's wife as the person fencing the stolen goods. A convict named Kenny, who had murdered a woman and tried to burn her body afterward, was hanged in chains at Parramatta as a public warning of its own.



*Indigènes de Botany Bay.*
Dessin de R. Cleveley, gravé par F. Medland.
(*Voyage du gouverneur Philipp*, 1789.)

## The Dispossessed Darug people

None of the granaries, the church, or the mile-long street described above went up on empty land, and none of it went up without cost to the people who already lived there. While convicts hauled brick and settlers rebuilt what fire and flood had taken, the Cumberland Plain underneath it all was Darug country, and the people who lived on it did not simply step aside. This wasn't a single episode that happened and finished. It ran the whole time, underneath everything else in this story, for years.

The pattern was set early and repeated often. Convicts at Parramatta destroyed a canoe belonging to a Darug man named Ballooderry. He speared one of the men responsible in return, a response entirely consistent with

his own law, and for it the Governor banned him from the settlement outright. When he later tried to walk back in with a group of companions, soldiers opened fire on them without warning; one man was wounded before the group escaped.

As land under crop kept expanding, so did the raids on it, and it's worth reading those raids for what they plainly were: attempts to reclaim food and country that had been fenced off and planted over without consent. Farms around Parramatta, at Kissing Point and Lane Cove, were burned, livestock killed, and settlers wounded, in what the settlers themselves admitted were clearly deliberate acts rather than random violence. Colonial authorities answered with a proclamation, read aloud and posted by name, ordering specific Darug men to surrender within fourteen days or be formally declared outlaws, hunted down by anyone willing to do it, with the Governor promising to hang the next man caught raiding a farm in chains at the scene, as a public warning to the rest.

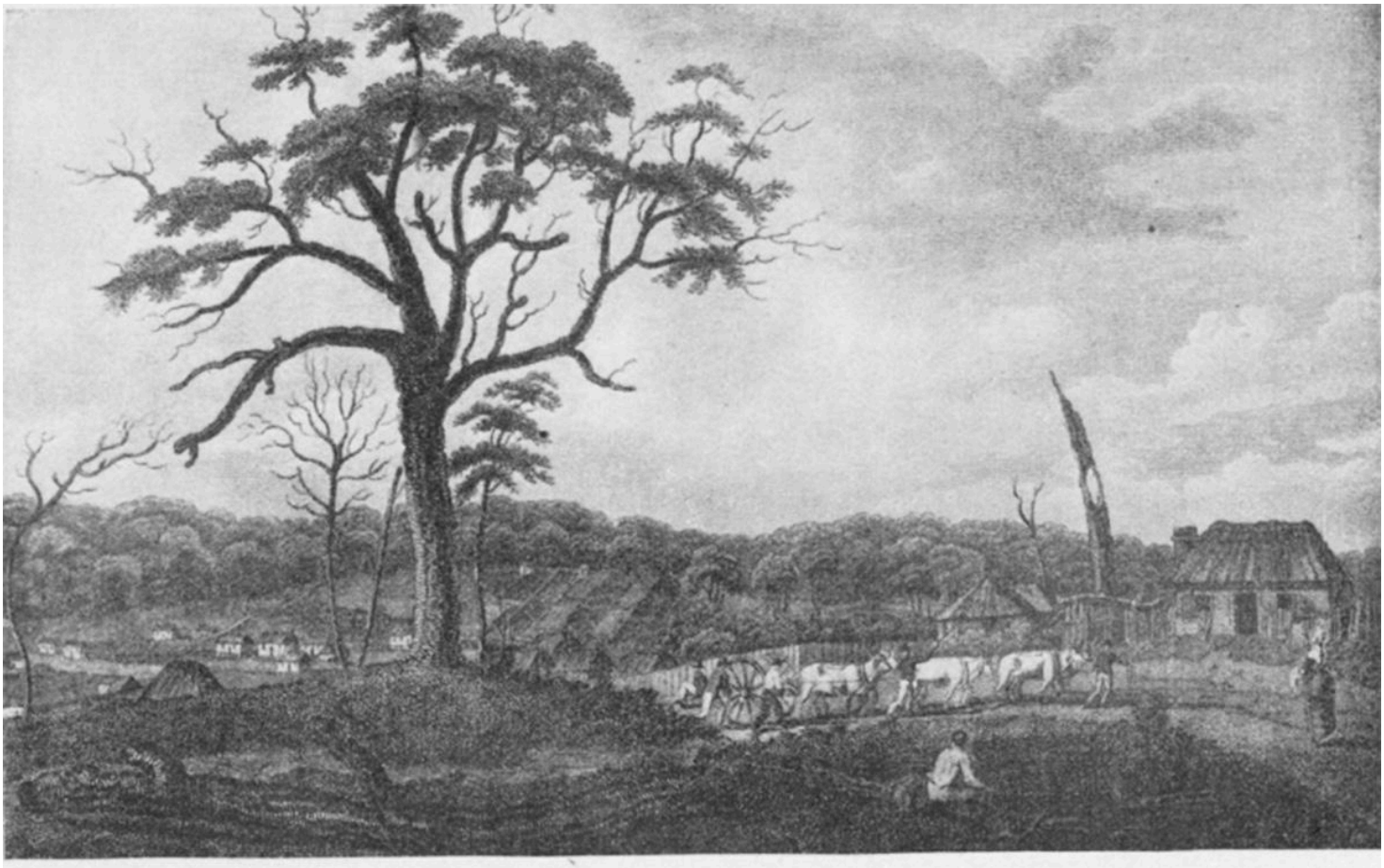
The pressure of dispossession cut in cruel directions inside Darug society too. A young woman named Yerranibe, who along with her husband had grown up partly within the settlement, was murdered by him and another man, Colebee, in the brickfields at Parramatta. And Bennelong, the Darug man most famous for having crossed between both worlds, was for a time accused by his own community of killing a woman whose dying words named him, though he denied ever having met her. None of this reads as a simple story of noble resistance against straightforward villainy. It reads as what dispossession actually does to a society under pressure from every direction at once, which is arguably more honest, and harder to look away from.

So while Parramatta was busy becoming a proper town, brick by brick, the ground it stood on was still contested, unevenly and often violently, by the people it had been taken from. Both things were happening at once, in the same streets, in the same years.

## 1802: A Frenchman's Day Out

The single richest description of early Parramatta comes from an outsider entirely by accident. In 1802, a French physician named Bellefin, travelling with a scientific expedition Napoleon had sent to the Pacific to study natural history, rode the 25 miles from Sydney to Parramatta out of curiosity, with a colonial soldier as his guide. He found the road better kept than he expected, wide enough for three carriages abreast, cut clean through forest so dense it felt like riding through a tunnel of green, with nothing but birdsong for company the whole way.

What struck him most wasn't the road, though. It was the farmhouses along it, and the people living in them. A decade or so earlier, many of these families had been exactly the kind of people Georgian England locked up and shipped to the other side of the planet: pickpockets, forgers, women who'd been arrested for prostitution. Bellefin describes riding up to these farms and being welcomed in warmly by mothers fussing over children the way any settled family would, watching English cattle "frisk about with a vigour" he thought matched anything back home. He was writing partly to reassure European readers that transportation could genuinely reform people, so it's worth reading with a raised eyebrow. But strip the moralising out and what's left is a real outsider's snapshot of a fourteen-year-old penal town that had, against fairly long odds, started to look and run like an ordinary farming district.



*Ferme sur la grande route de Paramatta.*
Vue gravée par J. Heath, 2 août 1796. (Collins, *Description*, 1804.)

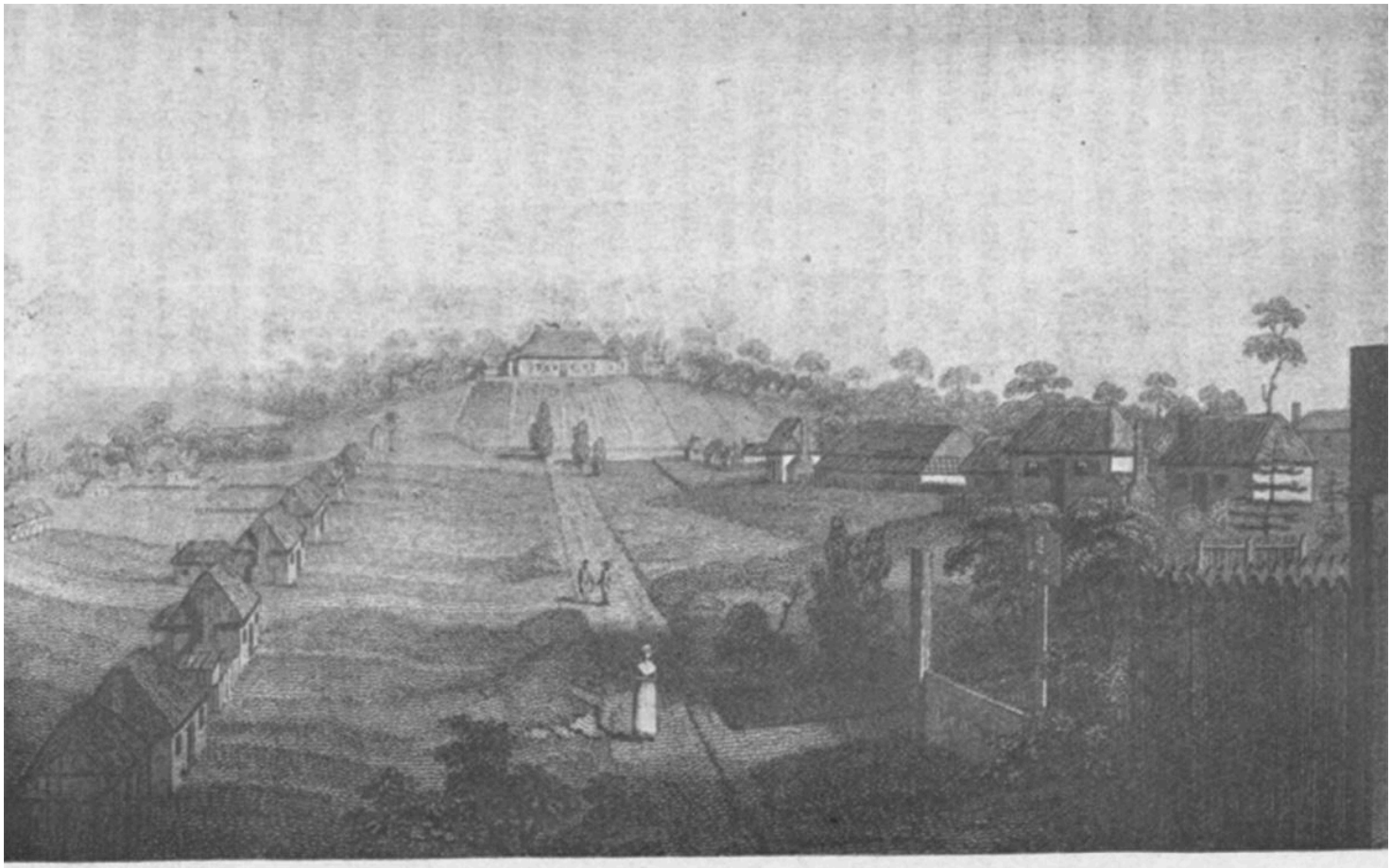
## 1832: A School, and a Fruit Economy Taking Root

By the 1830s Parramatta was building institutions meant to outlast any of the people running them. King's School opened in 1832 and would go on to become the oldest grammar school in Australia. Around the same period, the district's real long-term identity was quietly taking shape in its orchards. Parramatta sits on a belt of deep red loam, the kind that holds moisture well without turning to clay-bound mud in a dry spell, exactly the soil orange trees need. Local growers worked out how good it was early, and one of them, James Pye, spent much of his life breeding and introducing better varieties on his own estate. By the time anyone was keeping proper records, a single tree on Pye's property was reportedly producing upward of ten thousand oranges in a season, and by 1890 the surrounding district was turning out something in the order of twelve million dozen oranges a year, alongside grapes, wine, and potatoes. Parramatta oranges weren't a local curiosity by then. They had an export reputation that reached well beyond the colony.

# 1846–1847: A Governor's Family, Twice Over

Parramatta wasn't only a farming town by the 1840s; it was also woven into the personal lives of the men sent out to govern the colony, for better and for worse. Sir Charles Fitzroy arrived to take up the governorship in 1846, and in November of that year the explorer Sir Thomas Mitchell set out from Parramatta on an Imperial-funded expedition to find a port suitable for shipping horses to India, a journey that opened up huge tracts of what's now central Queensland and put several rivers on the map for the first time.

The following year, 1847, brought tragedy to the governor's own household. Lady Fitzroy, his wife, was killed in an accident at Parramatta, significant enough an event that almanacs were still recording the exact date decades later, sitting alongside milestones like the country's first railway. There's a strange, quiet echo to that later milestone, too: when the first sod of that first railway line was ceremonially turned in 1850, it was Fitzroy's own daughter, the Hon. Mrs Keith Stewart, who did the honours, with her father the Governor standing by to watch, three years after he'd buried his wife in the very town the new line was being built to reach.



*Vue de la maison du gouverneur à Rose-hill, à Paramatta.*
Gravé par J. Heath. (Collins, *Description*, 1804.)

## 1850–1883: Getting There Gets Easier

The very first vessel ever built in the colony, launched in 1789, was a small, ungainly craft the convicts nicknamed The Lump; its actual name was the Rose Hill Packet, because its whole job was ferrying people and cargo between Sydney and Rose Hill. That river run set the pattern for the next century.

By 1850, the colony did it properly. The first sod of the first railway ever built in New South Wales, and in Australia, was turned that July, on a line built specifically to connect Sydney and Parramatta. It opened on 26 September 1855, meaning Parramatta was the destination of the country's first ever railway journey. By 1890, a trip out on what was by then called the Great Western railway cost a shilling and sixpence in first class, elevenpence in second, a fare cheap enough that the town had effectively become a Sydney commute rather than a separate world. By 1883 the town had added a privately built tramway too, three miles of track connecting the river landing to the town centre, built at a cost of £20,000. River steamers kept running the water route in parallel, so that by the century's end you could get to Parramatta from Sydney by river steamer, by suburban train, or by tram from the wharf, a level of transport choice most colonial towns never came close to.

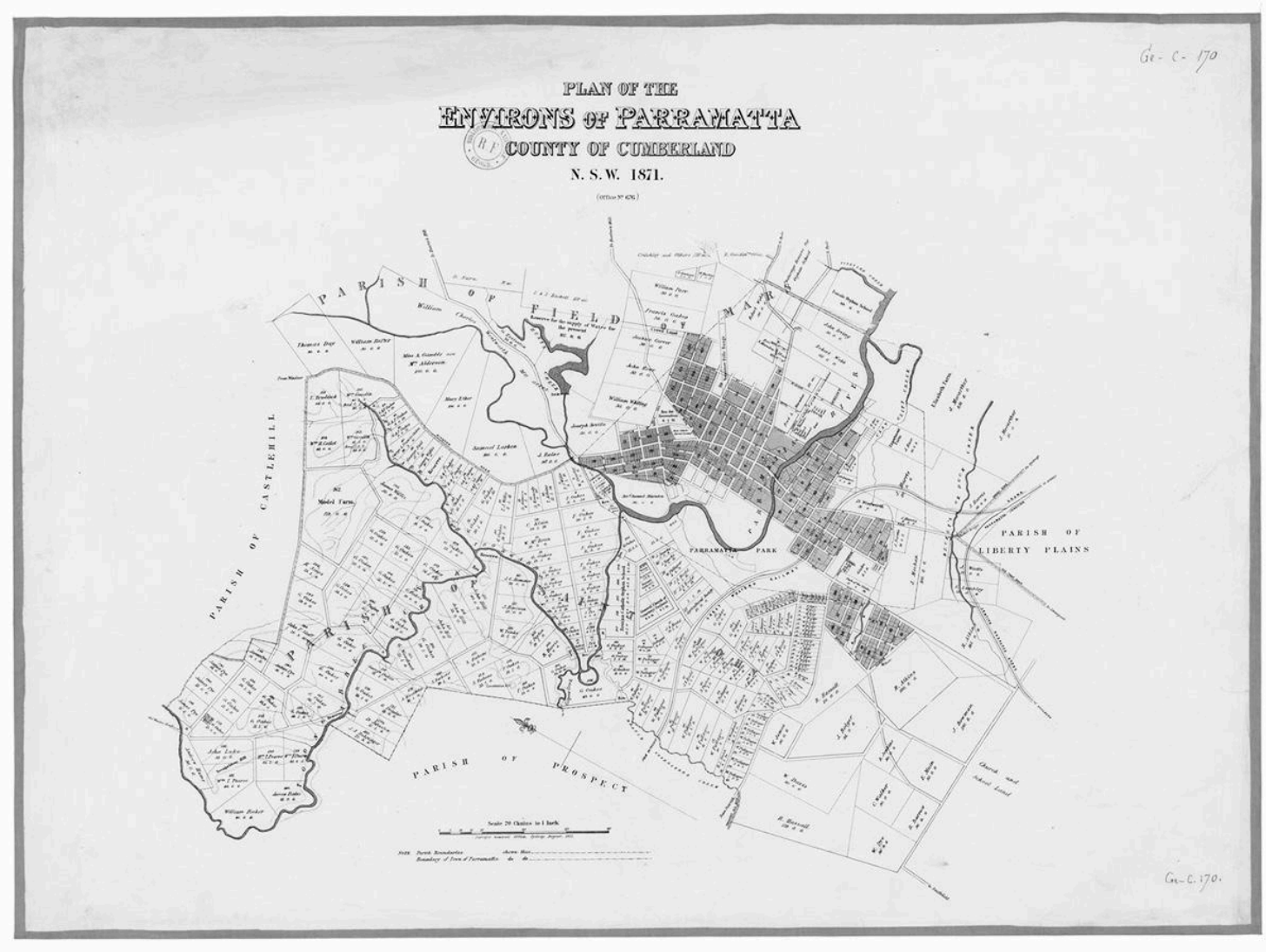
## 1875: The Doctor Who Fought the Needle

Not every voice from Parramatta's past belongs to a governor or an explorer. In 1875, a local general practitioner named John Morton printed a pamphlet on Parramatta's own George Street arguing, at real length and with real medical training behind it, that compulsory smallpox vaccination was doing more harm than good.

Morton wasn't some crank shouting from the sidelines; he'd trained at Edinburgh University, lived through the era's genuine medical arguments over practices like blood-letting, and spent time in general practice in rural England before settling in Parramatta.

He'd watched patients in his own local practice develop swollen glands and skin eruptions after vaccination and became convinced the vaccine itself was a kind of poison. He was wrong, medically; vaccination against smallpox remains one of the genuine triumphs of public health.

But his pamphlet is a small, sincere, argumentative window into a very different Parramatta from the one Phillip founded: a town with settled families, a functioning medical profession, its own printing press, and enough civic confidence for a country doctor to publish a direct challenge to government policy and dedicate it, in his own words, to "the Mothers of England, and Parents and Guardians throughout the World."




## 1890: A Town in Full

By 1890, the descriptions of Parramatta read like a completely different place from the one Phillip marked out with ten convicts and an axe. It was, by then, second only to Sydney as the oldest town in the colony, a borough with its own seat in the colonial parliament, its own police district, its own postal, telegraph, and savings bank facilities, and its own municipal government, in place since November 1861. Eight hotels served the town by name: the Commercial, Tattersall's, the White Horse, the Star, the Park, the Emu, the Royal Oak, and the Royal Exchange. There was a Town Hall, a district hospital, an Asylum for the Infirm and Destitute, and a second asylum on Macquarie Street that had started life as a military hospital under Governor Macquarie and by then held over three hundred people. The old Catholic orphanage had become an industrial school; the old Protestant orphan school had become a convalescent home. There was a proper gaol, two lunatic asylums, and a Mechanics' Institute with 1,440 books on its shelves. Nine separate places of worship covered the town's denominations, from the two Episcopal churches, St John's and All Saints, through Wesleyan, Presbyterian, Catholic, Baptist, and a Congregational church specifically singled out as handsome and Gothic.

Government House itself, the grand replacement building Parramatta's founders never lived to see finished, had by then been leased out as an ordinary boarding house under the plain name Park House, a detail that says as

much about the town's confidence as anything else: the old seat of colonial power had simply been absorbed into everyday commerce. The population had grown from 8,433 at the 1881 census to an estimated 12,000 by 1890, served by gas lighting, 95 miles of streets, four separate banks, and three local newspapers. A centennial monument and drinking fountain, costing £600, had gone up to mark the town's hundredth year. The park nearby had oaks along its walking paths that were, by then, the largest in Australia, and the nearby Rose Hill racecourse had a reputation as one of the prettiest in the colonies.

## What's Still There

Read this way, Parramatta's first century looks less like a series of clean breaks and more like one long argument the town kept having with itself about how much of its convict-era bones to keep. Old Government House, once rented out as a boarding house, is now restored and open to the public as Australia's oldest surviving public building. The church with the stone-pillared vestry and the clock tower is still St John's, still standing on the same site it opened on in April 1803. The river that carried The Lump between Rose Hill and Sydney Cove in 1789 is the same river the steam packets worked a century later, and the corridor the country's first railway followed in 1855 is, broadly, still the route the modern rail line takes. The soil James Pye's giant orange tree grew in is the same red Cumberland loam local gardeners still work with today. Very little of what made Parramatta in its first hundred years actually disappeared. Most of it just got built over, once, on top of itself, the way the town always had, going all the way back to a French sea captain who never meant to stay, and a governor who kept walking until he found ground worth staying on.

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Janine Preston is a Sydney-based journalist and Senior Local Reporter for sydneyinfo.net.au, known for her direct, no-frills reporting style and strong civic focus. A lifelong Sydneysider, Her work centres on travel & lifestyle, economy, and the environment. Current projects include the Sydney Suburb Project, profiling areas of Greater Sydney. Author notes Claude was used in proofreading and correction. Contact: jp@sydneyinfo.net.au

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*A condensed version of this article can be found online at:*
*https://sydneyinfo.net.au/the-first-100-years-of-parramatta-the-life-and-times-of-settlement-to-city/*

*Sources: George Barrington's 1811* History of New South Wales; an anonymous 1790s sequel to Barrington's account; David Collins's 1798 Account of the English Colony in New South Wales *and a contemporary 1803 review of it; John Morton's 1875 Parramatta pamphlet on vaccination; a nineteenth-century Sydney gardening handbook; and the 1890* Australian Handbook and Shippers' and Importers' Directory.